

More than Teeth: What your Dental Team Wants You to Know About Health Misinformation

BY CHRISTINE KIM

BOSTON UNIVERSITY HENRY M GOLDMAN SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE

More than Teeth: What Your Dental Team Wants You To Know About Health Misinformation

Have you ever read an article called something like: “*What your dentist doesn’t want you to know*”?

Have you ever seen a headline that promises a simple answer to an oral health question or concern?

Most of us have seen articles or headlines promising secrets or quick information.

In 2021, 8 out of 10 U.S. adults went online at least once a day*. Savvy marketing puts a lot of online information in front of users even when they’re not searching for something health specific. So much information is offered, and the messages often conflict. We click “share” without thinking much about it. It can be confusing and difficult to sort out what to believe and what not to believe.

Important to remember: Your dental health team is a trusted source for the most accurate oral and other health information available.

What is health misinformation?

Health misinformation is information that is false, inaccurate, or misleading according to expert opinion and the best available science. It is false information shared by people who do not intend to mislead others. Disinformation, on the other hand, is intended to mislead others. Misinformation is not a new problem, and the internet is not a new resource. Yet, misinformation has gained more attention recently with the continued growth and increased use of social media, especially in the COVID-19 era.

How does health misinformation happen?

We often share headlines or other information we see on the internet to spark conversation or connect within our online and other communities. Most times, we do not stop to check whether the information is accurate or whether the source is reliable. Instead, we click, skim, and share to participate in the conversation and see the reactions and opinions of other people.

Online content is made even more confusing when bits of science are mixed in with other misleading, or out-of-context, information. When false ideas sound reasonable or are seen again and again, they can quickly become accepted, even if they are not accurate. Oral health information is affected by this current trend of misinformation. Easily accessible and eye-grabbing content offers quick, cheap, or easy solutions to oral health problems. It is essential to check whether oral or other health information comes from credible sources.

Why does oral health misinformation matter?

Misinformation may lead to:

- The rejection of science-based public health preventive measures (i.e. use of fluoride)
- The use of untested treatments (i.e. homemade whitening solutions, quick fix dental products)
- The spread of dental myths (i.e. regarding how to brush, only eating sugar causes cavities)
- Mistrust of health experts (i.e. added fear or suspicion).

What do I check for when reading health information?

The next time you come across health information, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is the source **trustworthy**?
 - a. Is the information from an official source?
 - i. Websites run by the government ending in “.gov”, educational institutions ending in “.edu”, or associations ending in “.org” are sources that can *usually* be trusted.
 - b. What is the motive of the author?
 - i. The person or group publishing the information and their purpose should be easy to find. The motive should include accurately educating the reader and presenting information without opinion or bias.
 - c. Who paid for the research or content?
 - i. The information should be science-based, peer-reviewed, and without for-profit goals or interests.
2. Is the **content** valid?
 - a. Can you find the same information from a different trustworthy source?
 - i. A lot of misinformation comes from the same source.
 - b. Do they clearly state the science or resources?
 - i. Look at more than the title. The content should be supported by science based in careful research and credible sources.
3. Is the **publication date** recent?
 - a. Is the information still relevant?
 - i. Knowledge is always changing and being updated. Make sure you have the most current and relevant information.
4. What does your **health professional** say?

Talk to your dental team about oral or overall health information you see.

Try this easy rhyme to remember how to check the information next time.

Check from where it is **sourced**.
Is it reliably endorsed?
Check the **content** is proven true.
Is it an expert and scientific view?
Check the information is not **outdated**.
Has the topic, since published, been debated?
You can still be confused even with these clues.
So, check with your **dental team** next time you peruse.

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (September 2021). How to Address COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/health-departments/addressing-vaccine-misinformation.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (October 2018). Online Health Information: Is It Reliable? Retrieved from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/online-health-information-it-reliable>.
- Chou, W.Y.S., Gaysynsky, A., & Cappella, J. N. (2020). Where we go from here: Health misinformation on social media. Retrieved from *American Journal of Public Health*, 110, S273-S275. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305905>
- Dias da Silva, M. A., & Walmsley, A. D. (2019). Fake news and dental education. *British dental journal*, 226(6), 397–399. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41415-019-0079-z>
- National Cancer Institute. (September 2021). How to Find Cancer Resources You Can Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/managing-care/using-trusted-resources>.
- Office of the Surgeon General. (2021) Confronting health misinformation: The U.S. surgeon general's advisory on building a healthy information environment. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-misinformation-advisory.pdf>.
- *Pew Research Center. (March 2021) About three-in-ten U.S. adults say they are 'almost constantly' online. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/26/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-say-they-are-almost-constantly-online/>.
- Suarez-Lledo, V., & Alvarez-Galvez, J. (2021). Prevalence of health misinformation on social media: Systematic review. Retrieved from *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(1), e17187. <https://www.jmir.org/2021/1/e17187/>